



Coping With Workplace Stress

If you're like many other members of the workforce, you probably consider your job and its effects to be among the most stressful factors in your life. In a recent online poll,¹ 21 percent of respondents selected "job and career" as their leading cause of stress, while an additional 23 percent identified "finances." These were the top two responses, outranking time management issues, marriage or relationship challenges, children and parenting, and personal and medical concerns.

Changes in the workplace can be particularly stressful. Most people tend to attach emotionally to the groups, structures, methods and responsibilities that surround their jobs. When these are changed, one can feel alienated, unsettled, anxious and lost.

Stress is experienced both physically and emotionally. It is often caused by major life events, such as illness, the loss of a loved one or of something dear, or a change in an important life aspect such as work, health, housing or family status. Alternatively, it can be caused by smaller events that build up. While these may be harder to identify, their cumulative effect can be just as dramatic as the major crises.

The Stress Reaction

Your body's reactions to stress include a rise in heart rate and blood pressure, faster breathing, muscle tension and enhanced blood flow to the muscles, and increased metabolism. These changes help you react quickly – both physically and mentally – to any stressful situation.

Because the stress reaction helps you cope with pressure, you actually need a certain amount of stress to function effectively at your job. But unless you regulate your level of stress, a prolonged or overly intense stress reaction can harm your physical and mental health and safety.

Here are some common symptoms of unmanaged stress:

- Constant uncertainty
- Feeling overwhelmed by change or by your commitments
- The sense that you are out of control or without direction
- Feeling intense guilt over wasting time or neglecting your responsibilities
- Unrealistic expectations of yourself and others

Reducing Stress

There are many strategies and techniques that can help you relieve stress. Among these are exercise, writing and other modes of creative expression, hobbies and leisure activities, and relaxation methods such as yoga and meditation. Other ways to reduce stress include time management techniques, support from friends and family, and healthy lifestyle choices – including healthy diet, adequate rest, not smoking, and limiting your alcohol consumption.

Here are some tips that can help reduce job-related stress:

- **Take a break.** Even a very short interruption to your routine – a trip to the water cooler or a brisk walk around the building – can help you relax and regain your composure.
- **Use your lunch hour to relax.** Take a walk to a nearby park for lunch.

¹ LifeCare (2005). LifeCare Polls Reveal Leading Causes of Employee Stress and Caregiving Disagreements. http://www.lifecare.com/connection/2q05_2.html. (accessed August 4, 2006).

- **Pace your day.** Do the more demanding tasks early, when your energy level is high. Save the easy stuff for later, when you may be more tired.
- **Vary your routine.** For example, coming in early or staying late once a week may help you to get more done.

Your EAP can also provide you with available resources and referrals to help you identify and manage stress.

Coming to terms with workplace stress can be a challenge, and worrying about it can actually compound the stress. MHN's Online Member Services (OMS) website offers information and tools that can help you identify, assess and manage your stress, set personal targets and track your progress.

The Stress Assessment tool is part of MHN's interactive emotional health program. It assesses your stress level on the basis of a questionnaire you complete online. You can retake the assessment as often as you like, review previous assessments, and consider suggestions on what to do next. Additionally, MHN's online "Triumph Over Stress" program offers effective self-help methods for managing stress.

For more information, please visit eap4soc.mhn.com,
or call us at **(866) EAP-4SOC**.

Your EAP is there for you 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

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